

# Oral history project documents interesting past of refuge and peninsula

by Rick Johnston

You know you're getting old when you get asked to be interviewed for a Kenai Peninsula and National Wildlife Refuge oral history project.

The old adage "time flies when your having fun" has certainly proven true in my case. One day you're the new kid on the block and then "poof" you are the "old timer," and in my case, the second longest veteran or "the dinosaur" on the staff. Thankfully, refuge heavy equipment operator Dick Kivi postponed his planned retirement several years ago and has now saved me the distinction of being the official Kenai National Wildlife Refuge "sage."

Because Dick is usually out on his trusty grader and unavailable to tease, I seem to be increasingly the brunt of all the geriatric jokes or "old as dirt" jokes. I am also the one approached with the endless inquires about what happened in this or that year, or with this or that project or game board meeting, or some other event in 1979, 1982, 1987 and so on.

Many of the computer generation "youngsters" on the refuge seem to be allergic to good ol' fashioned file research, and are more than content to use my fading memory as the hard drive or starting place for basic historical research for a particular project.

Although, I always feign being annoyed, I generally don't mind... really.

Using me as a historical resource allows me to expound on my version of events and tell them about the world as it should be according to Ranger Rick. Putting one's own spin on events is really therapeutic for the aging mind and one of the rites of passage. Being asked about past events also allows me to interact with many of the future leaders on the refuge staff on a broad range of issues and subject areas.

I wasn't kidding about being interviewed for an oral history project. Lately, many former refuge managers and employees have been interviewed as part of the Alaska segment of a nationwide U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service oral history research project.

Most people don't realize it, but here on the Kenai, we have our own version of "Indiana Jones" or the "Relic Hunter." Kenai Peninsula resident Diana

Thomas, an anthropologist by training, has been commissioned to interview and record oral history information from several peninsula residents associated in some way with the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

In part, the goals of the project are to record and document previously undocumented oral historical information and facts before they are lost, or those with the knowledge become too elderly to accurately pass on the information.

In my case, however, I like to think that these folks are way, way ahead of themselves and they might be better off to interview me forty years from now.

During my "premature" interview with Diana I had the rare chance to reflect a short twenty years back to my initial visit and impressions of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, its staff, and the Kenai Peninsula.

It seems like just yesterday when on a sunny April day in 1978 I flew my Aeonica Champ 7AC from Merrill field to the Kenai airfield for a job interview with the legendary and now retired refuge manager Jim Frates. At the time, I had little knowledge of the National Wildlife Refuge System or the Kenai National Moose Range, but a lot to say about how I loved Alaska and everything in it. I was really excited about the prospect of working on the Kenai Peninsula and fulfilling a childhood dream of working as a wildlife officer or ranger in Alaska.

My enthusiasm was fueled by a recently completed private pilot license and my "new" 1947 two-seat airplane. The Kenai Peninsula from the air was a new and exciting adventure and I took every opportunity to tell Frates about it! At the time, I was only vaguely aware of the long and colorful aviation history of the Kenai and of several former refuge pilots. Although I did not become an official Department of the Interior pilot until sometime later in 1986, my love affair with flying over the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge began on that April morning 23 years ago.

At the time, the refuge headquarters was still located in Old Town Kenai and had expanded from a Quonset hut to a small but livable office and compound

from which the 1.7-million acre Kenai Moose Range was managed.

One thing that impressed me during my first visit to the refuge office, and often during my first year on the job, was the enthusiasm and sincere dedication of the small over-achieving staff. Most of them worked nights and weekends and never considered putting in for overtime.

The pending Alaska Lands bill bounced through Congress and added both a level of excitement and apprehension. Being a government employee was not exactly popular back then, but the majority of the staff seemed to know down deep that the purposes of the refuge and its wildlife conservation mission were important and would become increasingly accepted, even by critics, as time passed.

Not only has the oral history project given me an opportunity to reflect on many wonderful years on the Kenai, but more importantly it has given me a chance to contribute to this historical process. This oral history project as well as other recent efforts to document refuge and Kenai Peninsula history by backcountry ranger Gary Titus has added to the growing body of Kenai historical information.

The significance of documenting otherwise unrecorded historical information or reviewing historical records is sometimes not apparent until some

future time. The benefits of historical documentation can range from the ethereal or merely interesting reflections to life and death considerations such as documenting historical accident histories in order to change protocols or regulations to protect lives in the present. Not repeating mistakes is one of the more practical benefits of being a student of history.

Diana Thomas, a skilled and friendly researcher has interviewed numerous Kenai Peninsula residents. She utilizes a standard set of questions as well as impromptu questions by her, or reflections by the interviewee.

Most of her interviews have taken place over several days and are thorough and sensitive to the age and health of many of the elderly persons she has recorded. If you have an opportunity to be interviewed as I did, I hope you have a chance to reflect on your priceless memories, as well as add to the rich historical record of the Kenai Peninsula and the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

*Rick Johnston is a ranger and airplane pilot at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and has been on the job at the refuge since January 1979. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.*